

Introduction to Hegel's Logic

1. The Young Hegel and what drove him

Germany was fragmented and socially and economically backward

In order to understand what Hegel was doing in his Logic, we should first look at the circumstances of his life and the situation in Germany at the time.

Hegel was born in Stuttgart in 1770, just 620 km from Paris. So he was 18 at the time of the storming of the Bastille and his earliest writing, an essay on the prospects for advancing the Enlightenment by launching a “folk religion,” were penned while a seminary student in 1793, shortly before Robespierre launched his own manufactured religion of the “Supreme Being.” This project fell flat and Robespierre was himself sent to the guillotine shortly afterwards. Mainly under the influence of his friend, the poet Hölderin, Hegel abandoned his youthful disdain for the Christian religion and came to the conviction that, for all its faults, it was Christianity which had ultimately opened the way for the Enlightenment and modernity.

He completed his first published book, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Jena, just as the town was occupied by his hero Napoleon Bonaparte – “The World Spirit on horseback” in Hegel’s words. Napoleon was born the same year as Hegel, but died in 1821 shortly after the publication of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, which culminates in the section on World History where Hegel describes the role of world-historic heroes, “living instruments of the world mind.” Napoleon introduced the *code civile* into Germany, and smashed up its feudal structures. But the first uprisings of the French proletariat against the misery of bourgeois development in France, all took place after Hegel’s death, in the 1830s.

The industrial revolution in Britain roughly coincides with Hegel’s lifetime, 1770-1830, but the Chartist Uprisings took place in the 1830s shortly after Hegel’s death.

So Hegel saw the revolutionary impact of capitalism and the misery it brought with it, but he never knew a movement of the oppressed, a modern social movement. Also, some of the most brilliant women of the first wave of feminism were amongst his circle of friends, and included his mother and sister, but Hegel himself never accepted the claims of feminism. In fact, he had a dreadfully misogynist, essentialist position on women.

Germany did not have a state. Until 1815, Germany was part of what was still called the Holy Roman Empire, which stretched from Nice up the French border to Calais, across to Gdansk, bordering the Russian Empire down through Prague to Rome. It was made up of a patchwork of over 300 small principalities, some Catholic some Protestant, each with their own class structure and traditions and with no solidarity between each other or from their own subjects. England to the North, Revolutionary France to the West, Imperial Russia to the East and Austria-Hungary to the South. The armies of these great powers marched back and forth across Germany, pushing the German princes around as pawns in a power game in which the Germans had no say whatsoever. None of the princes of these little states could count on their citizens to take up arms in their defence. Germany was helpless alongside its powerful neighbors, and wallowed in social and economic backwardness as Revolutionary France made history with its armies and its politicians, and the English built an empire with their money and their new inventions, whilst Germany remained spectators in history. But this was the Germany of Goethe, and Schiller and Beethoven.

Hegel drew the conclusion that the German Revolution would have to be made with philosophy rather than with guns and mobs. And it was only relatively late in life (aged 28 in fact) that Hegel resolved to become a professor of philosophy and build his own system. It was the fate of his own country, the problem of modernization and freedom for his native Germany, which was his concern.

The Holy Roman Empire was brought to a close in 1815, just as the last volume of the *Science of Logic* went to press. And at the Congress of Vienna, in the aftermath of Napoleon's eventual military defeat, the German Federation was created with just 38 components. This situation suited Hegel, and generally speaking, the most creative period of Hegel's life was the period of the Napoleonic Wars, 1804-1815. We should also remember that Hegel never knew Darwin. *The Origin of Species* was published almost thirty years after he died. But he was familiar with the theory of Lamarck, and he positively rejected the idea that human beings had evolved out of animals. He knew of Lyell's theory of geological formation and accepted that the continents were products of a process of formation. But he insisted that there was change but no development in Nature. He actually knew nothing of the pre-history

of humanity and as surprising as it may seem for the historical thinker *par excellence*, he claimed that:

“even if the earth was once in a state where it had no living things but only the chemical process, and so on, yet the moment the lightning of life strikes into matter, at once there is present a determinate, complete creature, as Minerva fully armed springs forth from the head of Jupiter.... Man has not developed himself out of the animal, nor the animal out of the plant; each is at a single stroke what it is.”

At the time, natural science offered no rational explanation for the appearance of organic life out of inorganic life or of the origins of the human form, language and human history. It is to Hegel's credit that he did not try to resolve the problem of what he knew little about by appealing to what no-one knew absolutely anything about. He relied almost entirely on the *intelligibility of human life* as it could be observed: no foundation myths or appeals to a natural order beyond human society or appeals to Eternal Reason or Laws of Nature. In that sense, Hegel's is a supremely rational philosophy.

His misogyny and racism, which led him to exclude women and the peoples of uncivilized nations from being creators of culture, derived from his blindness to the fact of the cultural construction of the human form itself. Although this is a limitation in his philosophy, it is one which is very easy to correct for given all that we know today, 200 years later, and has had little impact on his Logic.

Hegel was a modernist opponent of liberalism

Hegel presents a contradictory figure. He was an enthusiastic proponent of the Enlightenment, indeed before his career as a professor of philosophy took off, he was briefly a newspaper editor and then for seven years, headmaster of a high school in Nuremberg and more or less dedicated to the ideal of *Bildung* – a German word usually translated as ‘education’, but carrying a much stronger connotation of personal development and acquisition of culture. So he saw himself much as a foot soldier for the Enlightenment. But it was the combination of witnessing what Kant in particular, but also Fichte and Schelling, achieved as proponents of philosophical systems and as university professors, and the increasing awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of the systems of these, his predecessors in German philosophy, which impelled him to construct a philosophical system of his own.

The Enlightenment essentially entailed the expansion of individual freedom, but unlike other proponents of the Enlightenment Hegel was *not* a liberal. Hegel did not

identify freedom with the freedom of individuals from constraint, rooted in an individualist conception of the subject. Now it is true that Hegel's communitarianism was to an extent sustained by an unwarranted idealization of the ancient Greek *polis*, somewhat of a fashion of the time. But more importantly, it was his experience of life in Germany which led him to a far deeper conception of freedom.

At best, an individual only has the power of the whole community of which they are a part. A citizen of a nation like Germany, which had no state, has no freedom.

So in order to understand Hegel we have to let go of the conception of the state as an instrument of oppression or as a limitation on individual freedom, and see the sense in which the state is also an instrument of its citizens and a protector of their freedom. Hegel did not know of the idea of the state as an instrument of *class rule*, and he conducted a life-long struggle against all those theories which promoted a liberal, or 'negative' idea of freedom. For him, the state occupied the space that it occupied for the people of Vietnam and other nations which emerged from the national liberation struggles of the post-World War Two period: that of a *social movement*. What he describes in his *Philosophy of Right*, for example, is not of course a social movement, but a state, complete with hereditary monarchy and a public service, but at the deepest level, the level which we find in the *Logic*, his philosophy is the philosophy of a social movement, of a people who has organised itself around a common cause as a social movement, or at least as a 'project'.

But Hegel wasn't simply a communitarian; he was deeply concerned with individuality and how the self-determination of an individual person could be realised in and through the acquisition of the culture of the whole community. His central concern was what later came to be called 'social solidarity', but his was a far deeper and more nuanced conception than that of Durkheim, for example. What Durkheim called 'organic' rather than 'mechanical' social solidarity was for Hegel only the first moment in the development of that kind of social solidarity in which individuality could flourish.

The real limitation on Hegel's conception of a social movement is that, as remarked above, he never saw nor ever conceived of, a social movement of the oppressed. He saw no reason to believe that the 'rabble' could liberate themselves. Modern theories of self-emancipation are all presaged on the formation of collective self-consciousness and the state is the material expression of collective self-consciousness par excellence. Hegel well understood that the agency of individual human beings can only be constituted in and through social movements and the institutions such movements create. One could go further than that. Hegel was deeply concerned with the role of individuals in bringing about social change, but

the conception of the individual which he developed was a radical break from those which had gone before. Even being a world-historical figure did not necessarily mean that you were conscious of what you were doing or that others would be grateful for what you achieved.

But it was this concern to find a route to modernity for Germany which led Hegel to an investigation of the source of the differing spirit of peoples and the fate of each nation. Hegel did not invent this study. Before him Kant and in particular Johann Gottfried Herder, who coined the terms *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*, had made investigations into the problem. By studying the history of a people, Hegel hoped to discover why one people would make revolution or build an empire, while another people would wallow in disunity and slavery.

Now this study of the “psychology of peoples” itself led to a dead end. Modern nations are not subjects in that sense, and Hegel, whose interest was in the fostering of both social solidarity and individuality, realised this. At best the concept could be useful in characterization of an ancient city state or of an isolated community perhaps, or to explain particular *aspects* of the character of different nations. In today’s context such a project would be seen as reactionary, firstly because it tends to erase differences of class, gender and so on within a people, and secondly because it reeks of a kind of “cultural racism.”

But remember firstly that the question was posed from the point of view of the *excluded*, in this case, the German people who were being ridden roughshod over by the European powers and denied a say over their own affairs; it does make a difference when the question is asked from below, so to speak.

But secondly, it asks a legitimate question, and it was a first step towards understanding the specific nature of modern social life and its relation to the psychology of the individuals who constitute a society. And it was a radical break from trying to understand the problem of freedom through the study of eternal categories of Reason.

The “Spirit of a people” was rooted in an historical form of life

Hegel’s early work, particularly the 1802-03 work, “System of Ethical Life,” is particularly important because in it we see Hegel working out his conception of spirit in terms of practical daily life. Taking the lead of his predecessors Kant and Fichte, and Descartes for that matter, he aimed to make no presuppositions, but instead of turning inwards to the contemplation of ‘clear ideas’, or making appeals to some type of mathematical reasoning, which actually take the validity of Reason

for granted, he took as his *given datum*, ordinary, living people creating and reproducing themselves and their society.

Now it is true that this kind of consideration is absent from his later works, including first and foremost the *Logic*, which moves entirely in the domain of abstractions and thought forms, but there is no reason to suppose that he abandoned this view of the construction of consciousness through labour. Philosophy in general and logic in particular has to stand on its own ground and cannot appeal to other domains for its proof. But we should not misunderstand. What Hegel's early investigations led him to was not a kind of social psychology, to do with how people *acquire* an idea, but a radically new conception of what an idea *is*.

Somewhere between the writing of "System of Ethical Life" and the next version of his system sometimes called the "Philosophy of Spirit," dated 1805-06, an important change took place in his idea of spirit. Whereas up till this time he had been interested in the spirit of a times or the spirit of this or that people, and looked for its origins in the day-to-day activity of people, following the pressure which comes to bear on every builder of a philosophical system, he began to talk about "Spirit" as such. So instead of having the spirit of this or that people rooted in an historical form of life, forged through the experience of victory or defeat at war, through the raising of crops or the hunting of animals, we had Spirit. Spirit manifested in the activity of a people, grew as that people fulfilled their destiny, and then moved on to another people. Spirit came and went, entered into the affairs of a nation, and would leave it again. So without any change in the conception of spirit itself, spirit became something that pre-existed the form of life in which it was instantiated. And it was one and the same spirit which found a different form at a different time in a different people.

This move greatly facilitated the construction of a systematic philosophy. All German professors of philosophy have to have a system. It's part of the job description, and by this time, Hegel had his sights on becoming a professor of philosophy. But it moved his philosophy into a more theistic area. At the same time, it is a move which for our secular times, is rather easily reversible. You don't need to have a conception of spirit as pre-existing human life and manifesting itself in human activity, to use the concept of spirit.

The other implication of this conception of Spirit was that it really emphasized the unitary character of spirit; everyone shares in the culture of a people, its language, its forms of production and distribution, its institutions and its religion. It is this shared character of spirit as Hegel conceived it, which comes to the fore, rather than a concern with distinctions and difference. But the point is: should we proceed like Fichte, beginning from the individual, and from the individual deduce the

nature of the state, the society, or should we on the contrary, begin with a conception of the state, a conception which rests on the collaborative activity of individuals, and from there deduce the nature of the individual persons. Surely Hegel was entirely correct. We all share, even if unequally, in the language, the science, the art, the productive forces, the political social institutions which are produced in our society; we constitute and modify them in our own activity. We all have our own unique take on that culture, but it remains a cooperative and shared cultural life. The same approach can bring a magnifying glass to bear on the consciousness of different classes, subcultures or natural groupings within society, but at whatever level, we have to be able to deal with individuals constituting a shared form of life and themselves as a part of that.

***Zeitgeist* remains a widely accepted, if problematic, concept of Spirit**

There is some basis for associating Hegel with notions of progress and a 'cultural evolution' in which all the people of the world are subsumed into a single narrative. But postmodernism itself is probably the most outrageous example. The point is that Hegel worked out an approach which can illuminate the individual psyche and its structure at one and the same time as studying the dynamics of national institutions, politics, movements in art and philosophy and so on. If we take concepts like "Gen X" or "baby boomers" then it's problematic to suppose that such a collective consciousness or personality exists. Lumping together entire cohorts of people born in a certain decade as if they shared common goals is arrant nonsense. And the same goes for any abstract collective like 'white collar employees' or 'suburbia' which have no collective self-consciousness at all.

This brings us to the essential problem here, the 'problem of the individual'. Nowadays we commonly hear people talking about 'two levels', the level of the individual and the level of society, of institutions and social forces. On one hand, we have individuals with ideas and consciousness and personalities of their own, able to decide what they do from one moment to the next, and on the other hand, we have impersonal social forces, such as the economy governed by the invisible hand of the market, politics governed by public opinion, the few powerful individuals who control the large institutions of society, and social and historical forces and laws. Sociology is in one department of the university, whilst psychology in another, and the conceptual apparatus we need to understand human beings is split into at least two incommensurable sets of concepts. But it is just the same individual human beings whether acting as a member of an institution, as an economic agent making market decisions, or acting out social roles such as their family responsibilities.

What Hegel's concept of spirit gives us is a set of concepts, all interconnected with one another in his *Logic*, which deal throughout with human beings *en masse*.

"Spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse*," said Hegel, and the study of spirit is nothing other than the study of the activity of human beings *en masse*. Just one qualification: once a people stops questioning its institutions and beliefs, then Spirit leaves them.

Spirit is a word people don't like to hear too much these days. It summons up notions of extramundane substances. But it is undeniably real, and to present Hegel's *Logic* simply as a philosophy without presuppositions, deleting any reference to "spirit" would be kidding ourselves. Hegel without spirit would be like economics without reference to the "market."

Spirit is the "nature of human beings *en masse*."

So "spirit is human beings *en masse*." But it is easy to miss some of what this entails. It is well known that a person left to grow up on their own, without contact with others, will not grow up to be a human being in any real sense. But this is only the half of it. If you dropped a million people into the jungle *together*, but without the benefit of the *material culture* built up by preceding generations, the result would be even worse. When we are talking about human beings *en masse*, then we are talking not only about so many human beings, and the forms of organisation and cooperation that they are involved in, but also the material culture that they have inherited and created and use together. This includes language, both spoken and written, means of production from factories and mines through to crops, and domestic animals and soils which are as much a product of human culture as are our own bodies and our basic needs. Language is part of material culture, whether written or spoken, and language is not only necessary for communication between individuals, but individuals use language to coordinate their own activity.

For Hegel, all these objects of material culture are thought-objects. It is true that they entail "externality": a word cannot be spoken in a vacuum, a building cannot be erected without the help of gravity. But a word is what it is only in connection with its use by human beings and the same is true of a chair or a key or a rosary.

One of the difficulties that Hegel had to overcome was the problem of *dualism*. Descartes operated with a mind-matter dualism, and Kant's philosophy got around mind-matter dualism at the cost of introducing a host of other such dichotomies and it was the need to overcome these dichotomies in Kant's philosophy which was one of the main drivers for Kant's critics, such as Fichte and Schelling and Hegel. For

Hegel, it was all thought. We will presently come to how Hegel arrived at difference from this abstract beginning, but the idea of thought, of Spirit, shaping the world, served as a foundation upon which to build a philosophical system. So Hegel was an idealist, but what can be called an *objective idealist*. That is, thought was not for Hegel simply something subjective or inward. It is thinking, the activity of the human mind, but the content of that thinking is objective, it is given from outside the individual, it is the individual's 'second nature'. The objects around us and which are the content of our perception and thoughts are the objectifications of the thought of other people, or ourselves. We live in a world not of matter, but of thought objects, which are, like all objects, also material things. But what makes a key a key is not its shape or its substance, but the fact that there's a lock somewhere that it fits.

One of the most popular approaches to modernizing Hegel today is what is known as 'intersubjectivity'. 'Intersubjectivity' begins from the same observation that "spirit is human beings en masse," but reduces human activity to momentary, unmediated communicative actions between individuals; the human body is simply taken for granted, subsumed as part of the acting 'subject', language is comprehended as simply the performance of individuals without taking account of the objective existence of a common language prior to its performance by any individual – the entirety of material culture – technology, land, domestic animals and the material relations involved in the reproduction of the species – are simply ignored. An interpretation of human life which ignores reproduction of the species, the forces of production and the entirety of material culture self-evidently fails to capture the notion of human beings en masse. This was not Hegel's idea. In his effort to understand spirit, these 'thought objects', which we may prefer to think of as 'material culture', are very much included in the picture.

Some interpretations of Hegel take as their point of departure the master-servant relation, §§178-196 of the *Phenomenology*. Very broadly speaking, those Hegelians who take this relation as their essential Hegel and those who take the Logic as their essential Hegel form two almost mutually exclusive schools of thought. What is special about the master-servant relation is that it is an apparently unmediated relation lacking any third point to *mediate* the relation. On the other hand, the *Logic*, along with the entirety of Hegel's works, is all about mediation. It is really impossible to read the *Logic* from the standpoint of unmediated relations, and in fact, outside of that one passage of about 19 paragraphs, it is impossible to read any of Hegel's work without making central the relation of mediation. And in any case, the master-servant relation is about how two subjects still somehow manage to mediate their relation even when there is no third party or common language or law to mediate the relation for them.

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